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The Roaring Twenties Through a Digital Soundscape

In the 1920's, a Japanese governor visiting New York City recalled, "My first impression of New York was its noise." (Thompson and Johnston, 2019). Although initially shocked, he became fascinated with the commotion, trying to distinguish individual sounds (Thompson and Johnston, 2019). This perspective on the city's bustling streets might have been lost if not for digital resources like *The Roaring Twenties. The Roaring Twenties* is a website that combines historical research with digital tools, allowing visitors to explore and understand the culture of soundscape and sensations of 1920's New York. This report will examine the website's purpose, digital features, and how it presents educational values, to demonstrate how digital history preserves experiences that would otherwise remain hidden.

The Roaring Twenties display how sound is more than just background noises; it is a crucial element of urban experience, both shaping and being shaped by the social and physical dimension of city life (Thompson and Johnston, 2019). This site was created in 2013 by Emily Thompson and Scott Mahoy at USC for Multimedia Literacy and revised in 2019 by Thompson and Ben Johnston with support from Princeton's McGraw Center for Teaching and Learning. Its development relied on resources from the Municipal Archives of New York City, Princeton University library, and the University of South Carolina Moving Image Research Collection, as well as input from musicians, scholars, and technical staff. Funding came from Princeton's Department of History, and the Office of the Dean that supported the creation of this website. As

it proclaims, this website serves a “sonic time Machine” (Thompson and Johnston, 2019), helping modern audiences experience the sound and culture of the 1920s in New York and recover the meaning of what life was like during this point in history.

To explore 1920’s New York, the website offers three paths: by Sound, Space, and Time. The Sound interface organizes the content by type of noise, allowing users to explore noise complaints by citizens and newsreel footage of noises from newsboys, steam shovels and radio loudspeakers. The Space interface plots those complaints and newsreels onto a street map, with scrolling and zooming tools that allow the visitor to explore neighborhoods and discover noises unique to each spot. The Timeline interface presents content chronologically, stacking noise complaints and documents to show the progression of key changes with noise complaints over time. This site includes 600 complaints and approximately 350 pages of reproduced documents (Thompson and Johnston, 2019). It also featured Fox Movietone newsreel from the 1920s, a resource that captured the sound and images of this era. The city map was digitalized and refined using Adobe Photoshop to match modern OpenStreetMap data. Altogether, these features provide an interactive experience that helps visitors understand the historic soundscapes and culture of 1920s New York.

Through its interactive tools this website demonstrates how perception of noise has changed over time, from the industrial clamor of the 1920s to the digital noise of the 21st century. By comparing past struggles with physical noise to modern experience of digital “noises”, this site highly encourages reflection on coping strategies and ways to find meaning in sound. While grounded in academic research, urban studies, or media studies, this website is also made accessible to students, casual history enthusiasts, and culturally curious individuals. It is designed specifically for desktops and laptops, utilizing up-to-date versions on a range of browser software including internet explorer, Firefox, safari, and chrome (Thompson and

Johnston, 2019). Overall, this allows users to browse at their own pace, ensuring a user-friendly and engaging experience.

In conclusion, *The Roaring Twenties* demonstrates how digital tools can preserve the sensory and cultural history of such a remarkable period. It provides modern audiences with the opportunity to experience the city's past in a way that text alone cannot. *The Roaring Twenties* is an interactive resource that uncovers the truth behind the sounds of the past and how they reflect the development of society and technology. By collecting thorough research with an approachable, user-friendly design, this website acts as a resource for educators and public engagement, showcasing how historical listening can deepen our understanding of today's world.

Citation

Thompson, E., Johnston, B., & Mahoy, S. (2019). *Roaring Twenties: Soundscapes of New York*. Princeton.edu; McGraw Center for Teaching and Learning at Princeton University. https://roaringtwenties.princeton.edu/index.html